The Harvard Carnivore Diet Study 2020

Exploring Health Impacts of an All-Meat Diet

Overview

The 2020 Harvard-led study investigated the health effects of the carnivore diet, an eating pattern centered on animal foods while excluding nearly all plant-based foods. Conducted via a social media survey of 2,029 adults adhering to the diet for ≥6 months (median 14 months), the research aimed to address concerns about nutrient deficiencies, cardiovascular risks, and overall tolerability.

Key Findings

- **Motivations**: Health drove 93% of participants, including weight loss, improved energy, and management of chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, autoimmune disorders).
- **Diet Composition**:
    - **Primary Foods**: Daily red meat (85%), eggs, and non-milk dairy. Organ meats were consumed weekly by 42%.
    - **Exclusions**: <10% ate vegetables, fruits, or grains more than monthly; 37% avoided vitamin supplements.
- **Health Outcomes**:
    - **Weight and Metabolic Benefits**: Median BMI dropped from 27.2 to 24.3 kg/m². Participants with diabetes saw significant HbA1c reductions (median −0.4%) and medication discontinuation (84–100%).
    - **Lipid Profile**: Elevated LDL cholesterol (172 mg/dL) contrasted with optimal HDL (68 mg/dL) and triglycerides (68 mg/dL).
    - **Subjective Improvements**: 95% reported better overall health; 66–91% cited enhanced mental clarity, energy, and sleep.
    - **Adverse Effects**: Minimal symptoms (<1–5.5%), primarily mild gastrointestinal issues.

Notable Considerations

- **Potential Risks**: Elevated LDL cholesterol raises questions about long-term cardiovascular impacts, though the TG/HDL ratio (1.0) suggested metabolic health.
- **Nutritional Sufficiency**: Despite low plant intake, few participants reported deficiency symptoms, possibly due to organ meat consumption or adaptive nutrient utilization.

Limitations

- Self-reported data and selection bias (motivated, health-conscious participants).
- Short-term focus; long-term risks (e.g., bone health, chronic disease) remain unstudied.

Conclusion

The study challenges assumptions that carnivore diets inevitably cause harm, highlighting short-term benefits for weight, metabolic health, and chronic conditions.